DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 576 CS 505 119

AUTHOR Phelps, Lynn A.; Smilowitz, Michael
TITLE Using Research as a Guide for Teaching Interpersonal Communication Competencies.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (71st, Denver, CO, November 7-10, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Interpersonal Competence; Speech Communication; Speech Curriculum; Speech Improvement; Speech Instruction; Speech Skills

ABSTRACT

Twenty years of research in interpersonal communication have provided teachers with a basis for identifying the competencies that should be taught in introductory interpersonal communication courses, including empathy, social composure, and conflict management. However, other issues such as "performance vs. knowledge," the affective dimension, and the situational nature of competency are still being researched and debated. Five suggestions for instructors who teach basic interpersonal communication courses are (1) review various conceptualizations of interpersonal competence and select factors deemed crucial for students to possess, (2) select a basic textbook that treats those factors, (3) encourage students to critically examine their own behaviors, (4) use exercises that provide the opportunity to observe others who possess useful skills and that provide opportunities to practice in a nonthreatening environment, and (5) allow students to make their own choices. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Using Research as a Guide for Teaching Interpersonal Communication Competencies

ED265576

Lynn A. Phelps

Michael Smilowitz

School of Interpersonal Communication
The Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701

Presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Denver, 1985.

CS 505 119

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Michael Smilowitz

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

The last twenty years of research in interpersonal communication have provided teachers with a sound basis for identifying the competencies to be taught in introductory interpersonal communication courses. Other issues, such as "performance vs. knowledge," the affective dimension, and the situational nature of competency are not nearly as resolved by the research. The following paper reviews some of the previous research to suggest possibilities for teaching the basic interpersonal communication course.

Using Research as a Guide for Teaching Interpersonal Communication Competencies

Recently, a student came into one of the author's offices to report his independent study on the effects of the technologies on organizational communication. The student lauded the rapid access to information, the tight controls, and the ability for organizational members to work on tasks without ever having to face one another. He was particularly pleased with the capabilities for organizational members to engage in decision making processes without ever having to leave their offices!! When the student finished, he patiently listened to the concerns about the effects of such technological "advances" on the quality of life at work. His response was surprisingly quick: "Professor, you need not worry so much about that. What you're talking about is the way the old-dogs used to do business....when they just sat around and told each other stories. The world is too rapid for that now. Kids growing up are used to the isolation, from playing videogames and working with computers....they don't need the same kinds of social interaction that people of your generation needed."

This isn't the forum for a lament about the consequences of the new technologies. It can be asserted, safely, that as technologies for improving the efficiency of communication become more commonplace, the opportunities for quality social interactions are likely to become less commonplace. If, indeed,

the opportunities for interpersonal communication as we know them are about to change, it is that much more important that we prepare our students for those changes by providing them with better understandings and skills.

The question of twenty years ago "whether or not we should teach interpersonal communication" has been resolved; clearly, we must. Now, we need to address a more fundamental question: "What are the interpersonal communication competencies we must make available to students?" Two other questions should serve as a framework to our decisions: (1) Do we know how an interpersonally competent individual acts? (2) Do we know what we should, and can, teach to help an individual become interpersonally communicatively competent? Our position is that the last twenty years of research have provided some important answers to these questions. In the following pages, we will briefly review some of the knowledge claims researchers have consistently reached, and discuss certain issues which instructors need to consider as they plan a basic interpersonal communication courses.

In the last two decades, researchers have devoted much energy to identifying the components of interpersonal communicative competence. For our purposes, six researchers provide major conceptualizations of interpersonal communicative competence, and allow identification of those attributes which have been consistently regarded as the important characteristics.

Argyris (1962, 1965a, 1965b, 1968) conceptualization of interpersonal competence contained three dimensions through six categories: (1a) helping others own up to their behaviors; (1b) not helping others own up to their behaviors; (2a) helping others to be open; (2b) not helping others to be open; (3a) helping others to experiment with new communication techniques; (3b) not helping others to experiment with new communication techniques.

Holland and Baird (1968), using the conceptual work of Foote and Cottrell (1955), developed a scale which contained six factors: (1) health, (2) intelligence, (3) empathy, (4) autonomy, (5) judgment, (6) creativity. Holland and Baird administered their scale to over 12,000 subjects. From their results, they provided the following description of an interpersonally competent individual:

> ...a high scorer on the interpersonal competence scale sees himself as a sociable, popular, persuasive, energetic person who hopes to become influential in community affairs. He also reports that he has many social, persuasive, and artistic competencies, and that he comes from a family which provided many intellectual resources and a wide range of experience" (pp. 506).

In an attempt to deal directly with those communicative skills of interpersonally competent individuals, Bienvenu (1971) developed a twenty item scale. Although the study is methodologically flawed by its absence of reliability and validity tests, the study did provide five factors believed to

characterize communicative competence: (1) a positive self-concept; (2) the ability to listen effectively; (3) clarity of expression; (4) the ability to cope with anger; (5) the ability to meaningfully self-disclose.

Drawing upon Bienvenu's work, Macklin and Rossiter (1976) constructed a battery of terms which, through factor analysis, yielded three interpretable factors: (1) expressiveness -- willingness to be spontaneous and honest; (2) self-disclosure; (3) understanding -- the capacity to listen and interpret cues from others accurately.

Finally, Wiemann (1975) devised a measure of interpersonal communicative competence which dealt specifically with communication behaviors; that is, Wiemann excluded personality, psychological needs, or other cognitive domains. Wiemann's scale conceptually contained five factors: (1) affiliation/support -- openness; (2) social relaxation -- non-anxious, not ill at ease, flustered, or awkward; (3) empathy; (4) behavioral flexibility; (5) interaction management -- concern with the procedural aspects of interaction such as initiation/termination of interaction and control of the topic.

In an effort to identify the common factors in each of above scales, Phelps and Snavely (1979) combined each of the independent categorizations identified above. The combination produced 91 items which were administered to 1483 students drawn from basic communication courses at eight mid-western universities. The results were factor-analyzed, and Phelps

Snavely reported five factors: (1) empathy; (2) social anxiety; (3) listening; (4) self-disclosure; (5) health. As would be expected, there were very high intercorrelations among the first four factors. The factor of "health" was poorly correlated, which too would be expected since it was a unique construct found only in the Holland and Baird (1968) scale. Interestingly, although Phelps and Snavely had expected "behavioral flexibility" to emerge as a factor, it did not.

It is evident that each of the six models utilized in the Phelps and Snavely analysis employed a non-relational perspective. That is, the investigations of interpersonal communicative competence had assumed that individuals who assessed their own communicative skills would provide meaningful information about interpersonal competence. Contemporary researchers recognize that interpersonal competence is a relational phenomenon and should therefore be investigated from a relational perspective.

Recently, Spitzberg (1982) developed the Communication Assessment Scale (CAS) which purports to measure interpersonal communication competence from a relational model perspective. The CAS contains 80 items designed to measure three factors: (1) knowledge, (2) motivation, and (3) skills. The knowledge factor includes the constructs of appropriateness and effectiveness, confirmation, perceptions of specific social skills and communication satisfaction. Motivation includes willingness to engage in conversation and the desire to recall conversational

specifics. The skills factor entails such items as eye contact, posture, facial expressiveness, the use of gestures, and paralinguistic items such as speaking voice, vocal confidence and vocal variety.

A far more comprehensive review of interpersonal communicative competence is provided by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984). In their analysis, Spitzberg and Cupach list 84 different scales which they believe relevant to measuring interpersonal competence. An examination of each of the 84 scales is beyond the scope of this paper, and unnecessary in that Spitzberg and Cupach have already done so. From our review of Spitzberg and Cupach's work, coupled with the six approaches already discussed in this paper, we would assert the following dimensions should be considered for a basic course which purports to teach interpersonal communicative competence.

1. Empathy
2. Social Anxiety/Social Relations/Social Composure
3. Listening
4. Self-disclosure/Self-concept/Self-esteem/Attraction
5. Affiliation/Expression of support
6. Interaction management/Conversational skills
7. Behavioral Flexibility/Social Adaptability
8. Conflict Management
9. Social Assertiveness

The above list represent concepts which are very much integrated. For the instructor of the interpersonal communication course, the common thread which integrates the listed items is the fact as relational objectives they are accomplished through people communicating with one another. As such, the focus of the course is appropriately the verbal and non-verbal behaviors which constitute relationships. Therefore, teaching these nine units assumes that the student has some familiarity with the communication process. To teach these units from a relational perspective further assumes the student understands the transactive nature of communication. Depending on the pre-requisites for the interpersonal communication course, instructors may find it necessary to begin the course with units dealing with general models of communication.

Developing a basic interpersonal communication course which incorporates the above units requires the instructor to confront a number of pedagogical issues. The research into interpersonal communication does not provide as obvious answers to these issues as it does for the course content. The next section of this paper is intended only to raise these issues and provide some considerations for their resolution.

In teaching interpersonal competence skills, one must confront the "knowledge vs. performance" issue. The issue hinges on the following question: Does competence refer to the <u>possession</u> of knowledge which allows a person to select the appropriate behavioral choices in a given situation, or, is it

the ability to perform the appropriate communicative skill in a given situation. McCroskey (1982), for instance, contends that knowledge and performance are not related. Other scholars, such as Allen and Brown (1976) and Spitzberg (1982a) contend that knowledge and performance should not be separated and that both terms are subsets of the term "competence." The arguments on both sides of the issue are well-developed, and it is apparent that there is no clear resolution since the debate finds itself at the level of axioms. The debate, however, does make evident that there are at least three domains to competency which represent the traditional classification of learning objectives found in pedagogical handbooks: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Spitzberg (1982b) in his relational model refers to these three domains as knowledge, motivation, and skill. Scholars in education have contended for years that although the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains are inter-related, they are relatively independent and distinct objectives. Their independence may explain why it is that an individual might be effective in one domain without corresponding effectiveness in a second domain.

An obvious analogy is clear to anyone who has attempted to learn the game of golf. There are individuals steeped in the theory of golf who may be better suited for golf trivia questions than they are for swinging a club. Others may never have read a golf magazine or even taken any instruction but are able to win the club championship. In similar fashion, there are individuals

who are successful at mastering the cognitive aspect of interpersonal communication but are unable to enact their knowledge. We know too many examples of individuals who are indeed socially competent but who have never take a class in interpersonal communication.

Most basic interpersonal communication textbooks appear to be excellent in their coverage of the cognitive domains important to understanding interpersonal communication. It is hard to find a basic textbook which does not have some treatment, at least, of listening, empathy, affiliation/support, conflict management, and assertiveness. Although tastes vary respecting the extensiveness and emphasis given to any particular area, it is obvious that virtually every basic text is providing minimum treatment of each of the expected areas.

The attention given to the affective domain by contemporary texts is less evident. For the most part, texts assume that every human being "is motivated to interact effectively with his environment" (Bochner and Kelly, 1974, pp. 283-4). The supposed obviousness of this assumption explains why it is difficult to find a model of interpersonal communication competence which explicitly mentions the affective or motivation domain. The lack of attention to the motivational domain points to a weakness of most basic texts: the authors have simply assumed students to be motivated to critically examine their communicative competence. Unless students are persuaded to expend the

necessary energy for such critical examination, the expectation for changes in their behavioral repertoire may be a wistful dream.

It is incumbent upon the instructor, we believe, to provide the necessary affective component to the course. A number of illustrative techniques might be utilized to meet affective objectives. For example, using segments of current situation comedies or soap operas are useful for demonstrating the "real consequences" of appropriate or inappropriate behavioral choices. Second, is the careful selection of exercises. The effectiveness of an exercise is best judged not only by its resemblance to experiences the students are likely to encounter; exercises should be selected for their ability to motivate students to critically examine their behavioral choices.

Recently, basic interpersonal textbooks have begun to suggest procedures for students to utilize if they wish to change their interpersonal communicative behaviors. Verderber and Verderber (1983) include a "Glossary of Basic Communication Skills" which appears in the format of a table at the end of their book. An illustration of what these authors have done they have identified "Empathizing" as a Skill. They provide a Definition of the skill as "being able to detect and identify the immediate affective state of another; Responding in appropriate matter." To illustrate the Use they indicate that the skill is used "to create or to promote a supportive climate." The authors suggest how the skill is operationalized under the heading

Procedure: 1. To listen actively to what the other is saying. 2. Try to recall or imagine what you feel like under those same circumstances. 3. Respond with words that indicate your sensitivity to those feelings. Finally, an Example is provided: When Jerry says, "I really feel embarrassed wearing braces in college," Mary empathizes and replies, "Yeah, I can understand that -- I remember the things I had to put up with when I wore braces." No less than twenty one skills are provided in the table, but this is, after all, only a beginning interpersonal communication textbook. We can only speculate about the size of the table which would appear in a senior level course textbook.

The Verderber and Verderber text is outstanding for its clarity. Although we are a little skeptical about a textbook which approaches illustrations of skills by categorizing skills into a table format, the book is a beginning in what believe to be a necessary direction.

The linking of skills to the cognitive and motivational domains needs much attention in our textbooks. Textbook authors may attempt to meet the expectation for skill development through the exercises provided in the instructor's manual. However, the particular skill, the steps in developing the skill, and the means by which students may assess their level of skill development seldom accompany the discussion of the exercise. Too often, instructor's manuals, and even less often the texts, fail to construct the bridge which links the classroom exercise to the subsequent development of the skill. Hopefully, future

interpersonal communication textbooks will rectify this shortcoming.

A final issue is the situational nature of competence. We recognize that an individual may be interpersonally competent in one context, for example work, but not as competent in another context, such as a social setting. Further, the determination of an individual's competence is ultimately decided by the members of the relationship apart from any criteria found in our textbooks. Accordingly, what might be perceived as competent (appropriate/effective in one situation, may not be perceived as competent behavior in another situation with different participants.

One resolution of the issue is suggested by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984). Their work suggests that not only should the context be considered, but the final arbitrator of what is appropriate/effective) should be the criteria important to the individuals who are engaged in the communication. This perspective is consistent with the view that competence is essentially an impression formed in a given setting.

The implication for the interpersonal communication course instructor is that the course should provide meaningful and important criteria for individuals to use in evaluating their behavioral choices. That is, it cannot be said what is right in every case, or in even most cases. Rather, the objective is to provide students with the understandings which allow them to

analyze the situation, make their own choices, and be aware of the possible consequences of their actions.

In summary, we believe that instructors who wish to teach a basic interpersonal communication course from a competence perspective should: (1) review the various conceptualizations of interpersonal competence and select those factors which the instructor finds crucial for students to possess; (2) select a basic textbook which has adequate treatment of the selected factors; (3) provide the motivation necessary to encourage students to critically examine their own behaviors; (4) utilize exercises which allow the opportunity to observe others who possess useful skills and provide them opportunities to practice in a non-threatening environment those skills which they do not possess; (5) all for the purpose of allowing students to make their good choices.

REFERENCES

Allen, R.R., & Brown K.L. (Eds). (1976). Developing communication competence in children. Stokie, IL: National Textbook.

Argyris, C. (1962). Interpersonal competence and organizational effectiveness. Homewood, IL: Irwin.

Argyris, C. (1965a). Explorations in interpersonal competence - I. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 1, 58-83.

Argyris, C. (1965b). Explorations in interpersonal competence - II. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 1, 255-289.

Argyris, C. (1968). The nature of competence-acquisition activities and their relationship to therapy. In W. G. Bennis, E.H. Schein, F.I. Steele, & D. E. Berlew (Eds.), Interpersonal dynamics: Essays and readings on human interaction (pp. 749-766). Homewood, IL: Irwin.

Bienvenu, M.J., Sr. (1971). An interpersonal communication inventory. Journal of Communication, 21, 381-388.

Bochner, A. P. & Kelly, C.W. (1974). Interpersonal competence: Rationale, philosophy, and implementation of a conceptual framework. Speech Teacher, 23, 270-301.

Holland, J.L., & Baird, L.L. (1968). An interpersonal competency scale. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 28, 503-510.

Macklin, T.J., & Rossiter, C.M. (1976). Interpersonal communication and self-actualization. Communication Quarterly, 24, 45-50.

McCroskey, J.C. (1982). Communication competence and performance: A research and pedagogical perspective. Communication Education, 31, 1-8.

Phelps, L.A. & Snavely, W.B. (1979). Development of conceptual and operational definitions of interpersonal communication competencies. Paper presented at the Midwest Basic Course Director's Conference. Ames, IA.

Spitzberg, B.H. (1981a). Competence in communicating: A taxonomy, review, critique, and predictive model. Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Anaheim, CA.

Spitzberg, B.H. (1982b). Relational competence: An empirical test of a conceptual model. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Boston.

Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W.R. (1984). Interpersonal Communication Competence. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Verderber, R.F., & Verderber K. S. (1983). Inter-act. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Wiemann, J.M. (1975). An exploration of communicative competence in initial interactions: An experimental study. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University.

Wiemann, J.M. (1977). Explication and test of a model of communicative competence. Human Communication Research, 3, 195-213.